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THE AMERICAN BOY.

IN the freedom and expansion of American life there is a tendency to excess, which appears everywhere ; in American humor, in American enterprise and speculation, and, to sum up, in the American boy. He can hardly be called a new species ; his faults and merits are those of the young Caucasian everywhere ; but in him they exhibit an ebullition which, as in some liquors, may be developed by a little more than ordinary warmth and movement, or by a removal of pressure.

A lack of moral pressure, in the way of judicious discipline, is often the cause of Young America's most conspicuous and most exasperating foibles. Perhaps more than any other boy in the world, he is allowed to grow up, doing about as he pleases. Among the wealthier classes, this laxity of family government may be the result of the father's immersion in business, and of the mother's devotion to what is called Society ; or it may come from their excessive parental pride : in their eyes the smart child can do no wrong. His impertinence is laughed at, and the perversity that should be brought to terms by firm measures, is soothed with sweetmeats, coaxed with candies. This faulty training exists quite as much among our hard-working people, with whom it often takes a different form through the tired mother's fretfulness and discouragement, or from the changing moods of the father. If the parents are cross, the boy keeps a wary eye to windward, expecting squalls, and knowing that his lightest misconduct will be visited by heavy retribution. If they are good-natured, he is bold in his disobedience. Here is an authentic instance of a Western farmer's method of enforcing parental authority:

It is Sunday evening ; he is smoking his pipe on the back porch, while young Josh, his namesake and heir, is playing with the dog in the yard. Old Josh takes his pipe out of his mouth and remarks that it is time for young Josh to go for the cows.

The junior makes no reply, but keeps on teaching Congo to give his paw. Then the senior repeats his observation, to which he manages to give a little more the tone of a command.

"I tell ye, Josh, ye must go for the cows!"
"I do' wanter!" grumbles young Josh.
"Quit yer foolin', an' go along!" says old Josh.
"I shan't," snarls back the junior.
"I tell ye to go!" exclaims the elder.
"I tell ye I won't," mutters the boy.
"Wal, never mind," says the father; "mebby they'll come home."

But even in families where good sense and gentle firmness govern the house, the boy may yield to vicious propensities in himself, or to bad influences from without, and run a course that may well cause his friends to despair of his future. His character seems to contradict all that is known of the laws of heredity, if we contrast it solely with the sober respectability of his parents, and do not look farther back. Whether man has emerged from monkeydom, may be a question. But that civilization has been evolved from savagery, there can be little doubt. And as the race has risen from ruder conditions, so the epitome, the individual, begins with the native wildness of the stock, and develops later whatever sweetness of humanity he may be capable of. The man is an enlightened being, the boy is a barbarian. He inherits not only the mild parental possibilities, but also all the cat-like or tigerish traits which enabled his progenitors, in the dim past, to make the struggle for existence. Sometimes it seems as if his humanity were as thin as his jacket, and fitted him as loosely. The wild animal is underneath; strip him and you will find the stripes. Perhaps even the sedate deacon, his sire, wears a not much more thickly woven garment of moral conformity and polite goodwill.

So I do not quite despair of the worst boy of whose daily doings I have some slight knowledge. He may be a model of good behavior at home, like a sheep-killing cur I once knew that was never observed to cast a carnal eye upon his master's flock, but would even defend it from other dogs, while he joined them in doing slaughter on neighboring premises. Wouldn't his confiding friends (I am speaking of the biped) be amazed if they could see

a chronicle of his deeds for a single day? In chestnut-time he is up early; in melon-time he is out late. Heedless of the notice, "No trespassing," he helps himself to nuts before the owners are awake, and regales himself on melons after the weary gardener has gone to his virtuous sleep. Broken boughs and a litter of empty burrs tell of his depredations; or he may be tracked by a trail of rinds to the corner fence. There he has sat with his fellows and finished his feast, as a number of scattered rinds bear witness, but beyond that he cannot be traced. It is he who pelts the school-girls with apples in autumn, and with snowballs in winter, generally from behind some wall or hedge. It is he who shouts up the doctor's speaking-tube, and then darts out of sight in the nearest alley. It is he who drives honest John Chinaman wild with his mischief, throwing rubbish into his laundry, and then tripping his heels with rope when he runs out to catch the marauder in the street, which they have darkened by turning off the gas at the lamp post. It was he who helped to get the minister's horse up the stairs and the hayloft, from which he could be got down again only by means of a staging built up to the window on the outside of the stable.

We go to the French language for the label, *enfant terrible*; but the piquant article itself we find nearer home. I believe the American *enfant terrible* can "give points" to any other *enfant terrible* on the face of the globe. He is not only capable of speaking the most disagreeable truths at the most inopportune moments, but he does not hesitate to resort to fiction when it will suit his purpose better. At a seaside hotel, last summer, a young lady wished for her gloves, which she had left in the parlor, but did not like to go for them, because two young gentlemen who had paid her some attention were sitting by the table. So she asked her younger brother to get them. He refused, and she finally went for them herself. The boy followed her; so did the eyes of the young men; when, as she was taking the gloves away the imp of perversity drawled out:—

"I offered to get 'em for her, but she wouldn't let me. I suppose she wanted an excuse to come in where the fellows are."

Though one of the mildest tempered maidens that ever suffered from the malevolent wit of a younger brother, one could see by the sparkle of her eye that, if his neck had been a chicken's, it would then and there have got wrung.

Why is it that in the boy of the family so much more naughtiness commonly crops out than shows itself in his sisters? How often do we see mother and daughters making silent, cheerful sacrifices to the headstrong selfishness of the son! His restlessness, his unreasonableness, and, what is worse, his unscrupulousness, are taken as matters of course, and borne with and forgiven. "He is a BOY!" explains everything, as if he belonged to a different order of creature from themselves. The father may be as mildly mannered and as conscientious as the mother, but the boy is nearer barbarism than the girl, for the reason that the fight for existence has fallen chiefly upon the male of the race, and that kindness is earlier developed in the sex that keeps the home.

It is fortunate when this effervescence of boyish force finds an outlet in useful occupation, or even in innocent sport. Giving a boy a gun, a fishing-rod, a bicycle, or a set of mechanical tools, may save him from so many things. A sail-boat may quench the ardor of his desire for a seafaring life, a camping out in the wilderness may cool his fancy for going to fight the Indians. Only do not let these curative experiences be too costly. A few years ago some youngsters in the suburbs of Boston conceived the not very original idea of going West and becoming cow-boys. Before undertaking the real thing they thought they would have a little practice as amateurs. They would lasso a cow. The leader, the Buffalo Bill of these juveniles, having to act the double part of horse and rider, tied a clothes-line to his own waist, and made a loop of the other end, which he threw over her horns as she was quietly feeding in the pasture. It took her some time to find out what the fooling meant. Then she made things lively for that boy. The part of the lasso-thrower was successful; but the part of the horse was a failure. He was thrown to the earth and dragged; one continuous streak of cow and rope and foolish boy flying across the brambly field, and over walls and fences, to the amazement of spectators, and to the especial profit of nobody but the village surgeons, who were sent for after the rope—along with three ribs—had got broken. A general impression seemed to be left upon the youngsters that there was not so much fun in lassoing a cow as they had expected.

There are undoubtedly better ways than that of letting off a boy's superfluous vitality and giving guidance to his activities. There is probably some sphere of usefulness which the most worth-

less ne'er-do-weel could fill, and would be happy in filling, if we could only discover it. Few parents understand their own children: it seems that they will never give over trying to force the round pegs into the square holes. The boy with an aptitude for mechanics must be sacrificed to the parental pride, sent to college and pushed into one of the crowded professions; a born naturalist is spoiled to make a poor man of business. The teacher who can discern and draw out the latent genius of his scholars has the rarest gift for his vocation. I remember reading a few years ago, in an educational journal, the experience of a schoolmistress with the most intractable of her pupils. Nobody had ever been able to do anything with him; punishment had no effect; appeals to his pride and ambition, and notes to his mother, were equally unavailing. So she set herself to watching him; perhaps by patient observation the key to his character might be obtained. One day she saw him catch a fly; and for the next fifteen minutes he was absorbed in a minute examination of the insect, his usually dull and listless countenance lighted up with the keenest interest. There was certainly one avenue to his intelligence she determined to test it.

"Boys," she took occasion to say, not long after, "what can you tell me about flies?" She called upon the brightest members of his class and found that they could tell very little. Then came the turn of the dullard. For the first time in his life his enthusiasm was kindled by something going on in school. He forgot his indifference, and became eloquent, giving a brief description of the wings, feet, eyes, head and habits of the fly, to the astonishment of teacher and pupils. Talking with him afterwards she learned that it was his fondness for the woods and fields and of the study of insects and birds that distracted his attention from his books, and distressed his mother with the belief that he was wasting his time. His new teacher took a different view of the case, put books of natural history into his hands, and led him by degrees to see the necessity of preparing himself for his favorite pursuit by learning something of grammar, geography and mathematics. So the dunce of the school became one of the best scholars, and in later years eminent.

The prevailing modes of teaching have not always been the best that could be devised for educating, that is, drawing out the latent energies of the young. How many capable graduates we

have known who have passed from the academy or the college to find that all their book-learning has left them unfitted for the first step in the business of life ! Crammed with unassimilated knowledge, they have not been taught to *think* ; there is nothing that they can *do*. Industrial and practical art training, which is now assuming an important place in our educational system, promises to be of the very greatest use in developing and molding such minds.

The effect upon a boy, especially if he has been what we call a "bad boy," of turning his energies in the right channel, can sometimes be likened only to the supposed miraculous conversion of sinners. His restlessness is curbed. The new purpose shines in his countenance and beams from his eye. All his views of life are suddenly changed. It is no longer a mere frolic, to be enjoyed in the fleeting hour, at all hazards, but something deep and vast and serious, full of perils, but also full of glorious possibilities. The brier of his wildness puts forth the bud of wisdom; prudence bridles impulse. Happy the son, and happy indeed the parents, when such a transformation takes place. Is not every reckless young spendthrift of golden days capable of such a conversion? All over the land despairing parents are anxiously asking the question: "Cannot the good in our boy be reached ? Will he never turn from his wayward course?"

But we must not judge the army by its stragglers and hangers-on. While there is always a ragged edge of the incompetent and the vicious on its borders, the great body of boys in this land, as in any other land, marches steadily forward to an assured future. In these ranks are the statesmen, the judges, the great poets, the great orators that are to be. In this land, as in no other, exist opportunities which may make the lowliest lad of the present the foremost man of the coming time, a truism which it is well enough for both sons and fathers sometimes to reconsider.

I almost repent calling the boy a barbarian, now that I think of some magnanimous boys I have known. What unconscious heroism in common life ; what devotion to the humblest duties ; what uncomplaining sacrifice and plodding services, for the sake of mother and sisters and home ! Small heroes of that sort exist, obscure and unrecognized, all over America to-day.

The most remarkable instance of conscientiousness and generosity in a child which ever came to my knowledge was exhibited,

not by a girl, but by a boy. He was, however, a very youthful specimen; Willie, aged five or six. He had a cake, a portion of which his cousin Minnie coveted. She accordingly reminded him, as she was fond of doing when she had a point to gain, of what "the Bible says" about doing to others as we would be done by. "Now, you know, Willie, if I had the cake you would want half of it." Willie hesitated a moment between inclination and a conviction of duty, then said honestly: "I should want all of it." With tears in his eyes, but resolutely choking down his grief, he handed over to her the entire cake, which she walked off complacently nibbling.

Boys will put upon one another and quarrel among themselves; but let one get into trouble, through no special fault or meanness of his own, and see how generously they will stand by him and combine to help him out. Their efforts on his behalf may not always be wise; I can recall cases in which they were curiously inadequate. In the town where I live there used to be a card factory, at the door of which was a heap of leather shavings. One day half a dozen school-boys might have been observed to gather up handfuls of these trimmings and carry them to a neighboring shed. There, after a sufficient quantity had been accumulated, one of their number, whom we will call Jacob, removed a portion of his clothing and loosened his vest, while his companions plated him all over and stuffed him full of scraps and parings, bound in place by kite strings, and finally buttoned firmly under his trousers and jacket. He was to be the recipient in school that afternoon of a flogging of which his mates did not approve, and this was the coat-of-mail with which they ingeniously provided him. Their intentions were excellent, but the result was not satisfactory. Jacob, on re-entering the school-room, seemed to have grown astonishingly rotund during his dinner hour, and perhaps there was something in his gait (he moved with careful circumspection in the fear of dislocating his armor), which excited the master's suspicions. A preliminary shaking, as he was hauled up for punishment, prepared for the catastrophe, so that when his thrashing began the rain of refuse leather down his trousers-leg, and out of his sleeves and waistbands, was something phenomenal, and long to be remembered. What added weight to his woe was the inconsiderate laughter of his mates, whose mistaken kindness had thus exposed him to a double dose of the birch.

Boys will laugh at such things despite all the dictates of honor and humanity. Excessive mirthfulness is characteristic of the American shaver. But it is a pardonable fault. Not so his lack of reverence, which is perhaps his most notorious and most discreditable failing. When his laughter springs from that, as it so often does, it ceases to be innocent. One often wonders if there is anything in heaven or on earth so sacred that the lawless urchin will not make fun of it. Deference to superiors, respect for parents, veneration for years and wisdom, these are qualities of which he knows little or cares less. It is a radical defect ; not simply a source of annoyance to others, but a flaw in his moral constitution. Nor is it confined to the juvenile trifler alone. The spirit of national independence has gone into the boys' heads. If the American youth does not press forward and unlock the golden gate of life, to which art, science, literature, all the shining avenues of enterprise are but the splendid approaches, it will be chiefly for want of

“The master-key of knowledge, reverence.”

Other tendencies to excess in our life and manners are especially perilous to the American youngster. The rage of speculation, the hurry to get rich, the passion for display, social excitement and extravagance, cast an early blight upon his purest aspirations. Caught in the furious whirl of fast living, he has little opportunity for the culture of what is most delicate and precious in the heart and mind. The example of successful bad men relaxes his moral sense : he comes to think that obligation is nothing, that duty is an illusion, and life itself a lottery in which audacity and unscrupulousness bear off the prize. When he sees even good citizens, for party purposes, condone the practices of corrupt wire-pullers and political Pecksniffs, how can he continue to believe in the sacredness of pledges, of honor in public and private affairs ? It behooves fathers to be honest, sober, prudent in their own conduct, and chary in their choice of teachers and law-makers, if only for the sake of the influence exerted upon their sons.

When Mr. Emerson contrasted the not over-luxurious habits to which his children were brought up with the pinching circumstances of his own childhood, he expressed some misgivings, thinking the cold and bare-floored attic a safer nursery than warmed and carpeted chambers for hardy character and high

thoughts. But it is not easy to conceive of a mind like Emerson's being rendered effeminate by early conditions of affluence, although they may afford temptation and opportunity to a boy innately vicious. Early days of hardship are sometimes, no doubt, a useful discipline, and every brave boy will make the best of them. But Washington was a born aristocrat, and it is a question whether Lincoln and Garfield might not have been as well fitted for their respective careers if they had had a less severe fight with fortune at the start. Of the young volunteers who flew to arms at the outbreak of our civil war, it was found that those who had been gently nurtured were not only among the bravest in battle, but the most cheerful and uncomplaining amidst the miseries of hospital, bivouac and march. It depends more upon what a boy has in him, than upon his surroundings, whether he will leave life a failure or make it a success.

There was never any better stuff in the world for the shaping of men than there is in the American boy of to-day. Even when wicked he is not often mean in his wickedness ; he might be the hero of Plutarch's story of the Lacedæmonian lad, who, having stolen a fox, held it concealed under his cloak while it tore his bowels out rather than have the theft discovered. With all his failings, which are many and manifest, he has courage, gayety, endurance, readiness of wit and potency of will. Give direction to these forces, deepen his conscience and elevate his point of view, and the future of the American boy, the future of America itself, is secure.

J. T. TROWBRIDGE.